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ABSTRACT

Several studies of the differences in teacher and learner perceptions of the usefulness of certain teaching techniques and activities reveal clear mismatches between learners' and teachers' views of language learning. The differences seem to be due to the sociocultural background and previous learning experiences of the learners and the influence on teachers of recent theory in communicative language learning and teaching, and they are likely to influence the effectiveness of teaching strategies. It is the responsibility of the teacher to teach not only the language but also how to be a language learner, which includes convincing learners of the value of communicative classroom activities such as role playing and problem solving, through explanation, discussion, and demonstration. It is only through sensitivity to the learners and their perception of the learning process, along with a willingness to consult and negotiate, that curriculum innovations are likely to be effective. (MSE)

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COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING: THE LEARNER'S VIEW

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1. INTRODUCTION

Communicative approaches to language teaching have been enthusiastically embraced by applied linguists and practitioners in many different language teaching contexts and environments. From a survey of the literature in recent years, it would be reasonable to conclude that there had been a revolution in the classroom, and that strategies for encouraging communication had largely surplanted more traditional classroom activities.

These developments have led to a more learner-centred orientation to syllabus design and methodology. However, it could be argued that much of what passes for learner-centred, needs-based curriculum development focuses too heavily on the objective specification of language content, and too little on the subjective specification of methodology. (Brindley 1984a, 1984b). Brindley has suggested that:

> In the earliest stages of the "communicative" movement in language teaching, "objective" needs received a great deal of emphasis, since language was seen primarily as a

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> means to an end: effective communication in the learner's current or future domain of language use. ... "Subjective" needs, on the other hand, as we have noted, were thought to be unpredictable, therefore indefinable. Language teachers were thus able, in deciding on content and methodology, to wash their hands of the extremely difficult business of taking affective variables into account: it was the language content derived from a diagnosis of the language-related "objective" needs which was identified with the learning content of the course. The importance of methodology in "communicative" courses therefore tended to be downplayed in relation to content
>
> (Brindley 1984b:31-32)

If we are to be really learner-centred, then the subjective needs and attitudes of the learner must be taken into consideration. If they are not to be the subject of immediately adoption, at the very least they need to be the focus of negotiation.

Much of the effort in applied lingustics has been directed towards the discovery of the "one best method", the search for a sort of linguistic holy grail The communicative approaches of the seventies and eighties no less than the code based approaches of the sixties have all been motivated by this search. Somewhere along the way the learner seems to have got lost.

It is only fairly recently that learners themselves have become the focus of investigation. Such investigations have revealed some interesting insights into the teaching/learning process; that learners are different and learn in different ways, that there may, in fact, be no one best way of learning (Willing 1985), and that while learners are being taught one thing, they are very often learning something quite different (Johnston 1985).

One of the most serious blocks to learning is the mismatch between teacher and learner expectations about what should happen in the classroom. In this paper I wish explore this mismatch by drawing together a number of recent studies which point to a disparity between learner perceptions and teacher attitudes towards desirable teaching strategies. The implications of this research for the communicative classroom are discussed.

2. EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATIONS

2.1 The Data

Several studies conducted during 1985 provide the data for this investigation into learner and teacher perceptions of appropriate learning activities and strategies. These data are presented in this section.

Eltis and Low (1985), in a national survey into the teaching process within the Adult Migrant Education Program, questioned 445 teachers on

the usefulness of various teaching activities. The rank ordering according to perceived usefulness is set out in Table 1.

Table 1

Rank Ordering of Teaching Activities According to Perceived Usefulness (Eltis and Low 1985).

Activity	%
Students working in pairs/small groups	80
Role play	56
Language games	51
Reading topical articles	48
Students making oral presentations	46
Cloze (gap filling) exercises	45
Using video materials	40
Student repeating teacher cue (drill)	34
Exercise in free writing	27
Setting and correction of homework	25
Listening and note taking	25
Repeating and learning dialogues	20
Students reading aloud in class	21
Exercises in conference writing	18

Teachers were asked to choose the two activities which they found to be most valuable in their teaching. The activities which were rated as significant were:

Students working in pairs/small groups

Language games

Role play

Reading topical articles

Cloze (gap filling) exercises.

Alcorso and Kalantzis (1985) studied the perceptions of students. While they did not canvass exactly the same activities as Eltis and Low, there are enough similarities in the survey instruments to make comparisions. Their findings are set out in Table 2.

Table 2

Most Useful Parts of Lesson According to Students (Alcorso and Kalantzis 1985)

Activity	%
Grammar exercises	40
Structured class discussion/conversation	35
Copying written material, memorising, drill and repetition work	25
Listening activities using cassesttes	20
Reading books and newspapers	15
Writing stories, poems, descriptions	12
Drama, role play, songs, language games	12
Using audio visuals, TV, video	11
Communication tasks, problem-solving	10

These data indicate that those teachers surveyed would seem to rate "communicative" type activities highly, while learners favoured more "traditional" learning activities, the one exception being "structured conversation". In interviews with learners who took part in the survey, Alcorso and Kalantzis report that:

> There seemed to be a common view about the importance of grammar across respondents with different levels of English and from diverse educational backgrounds... In explaining their preferences, the learners said they saw grammar-specific exercises as the most basic and essential part of learning a language. (p.43)
>
> ... conversation was another frequently mentioned activity considered useful for learning English... Typically what people meant by the word 'conversation' was speaking with the teacher, group and class discussions and question and answer sessions with the teacher. (p.44)
>
> [Games, singing and dance] These activities were among the most contentious since most students had firm views about their usefulness or uselessness. Again the divergence of opinion seemed to relate to people's educational background and socio-economic position. The most common comment from high school or tertiary educated migrants was that in general, dance, singing and games were a waste of time.

(p.48)

Willing (1985) investigated the learning preferences of 517 learners. His survey instrument contained thirty questions relating to class activities, teacher behaviour, learning group, aspect of language, sensory-modality options, and "outside class" activities. Learners, who were provided with bilingual assistance where necessary, rated each of these on a four point scale.

A factor analysis of the data revealed patterns of variation in the responses with four different learner types. These are as follows:

1. "Concrete" learners

These learners preferred learning by games, pictures, films and video, talking in pairs, learning through the use of cassette and going on excursions.

2. "Analytical" learners

These learners liked to study grammar, studying English books, studying alone, finding their own mistakes, having problems to work on, learning through reading newspapers.

3. "Communicative" learners

This group liked to learn by observing and listening to native speakers, talking to friends in English, watching TV in English, using English in

shops etc., learning English words by hearing them, and learning by concersations.

4. "Authority-oriented" learners.

These students liked the teacher to explain everything, writing everything in a notebook, having their own textbook, learning to read, studying grammar and learning English words by seeing them.

Despite the variation, there were some activity types which rated very highly overall. These were pronunciation practice, explanations to the class, conversation practice, error correction and vocabulary development. Others receiving low or very low ratings included listening to or using cassettes, student self-discovery of errors, learning through pictures, films and video, pair work and language games.

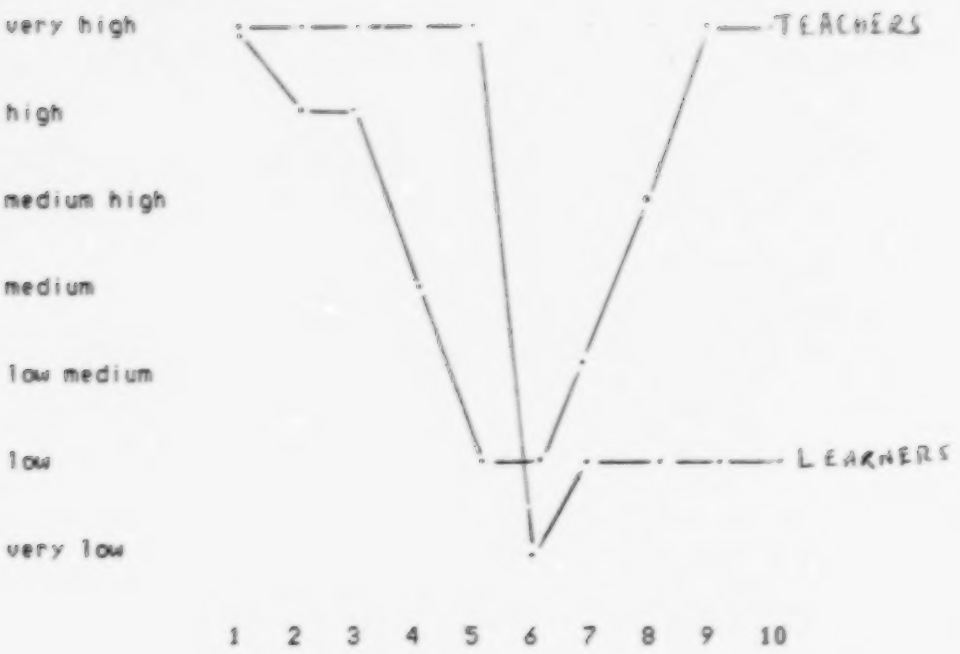
As already indicated, studies such as those be Alcorso and Kalantzis and Eltis and Low, while providing interesting indications, are not directly comparable. In order to provide data on learner and teacher perceptions which could be directly compared, I conducted a study using a survey instrument based on ten of the most and least popular student learning activities from the Willing study. Sixty teachers from the Adult Migrant Education Program were asked to rate these activities according to their degree of importance. The rating and scoring systems used were identical with those employed in the Willing study. The results are set out in Table 3.

Table 3

A Comparison of Student and Teacher Ratings of Selected Learning Activities.

Activity	Student	Teacher
Pronunciation practice	very high	medium
Explanations to class	very high	high
Conversation practice	very high	very high
Error correction	very high	low
Vocabulary development	very high	high
Listening to/using cassettes	low	medium high
Student self-discovery of errors	low	very high
Using pictures/films/video	low	low medium
Pair work	low	very high
Language games	very low	low

These results indicate that only in one instance is there a match between the ratings of students and teachers, that is, in the importance accorded to conversation practice. All other activities are mismatched, some dramatically so, in particular pronunciation practice, error correction, listening to/using cassettes, student self-discovery of error and pair work. The results are represented diagramatically in Figure 1



1 Conversation practice

2 Explanations to class

3 Vocabulary development

4 Pronunciation practice

5 Error correction

6 Language games

7 Using pictures, films, video

8 Listening to/ using cassettes

9 Student self-discovery of errors

10 Pair work

Figure 1

Teacher and learner ratings of learning activities: a comparison.

2.2 Discussion

The data presented in the preceding section reveal clear mismatches between learners' and teachers' views of language learning. The Willing and Nunan studies demonstrate mismatches in all but one activity investigated, and quite significant mismatches in half of the activities. There is some difficulty in interpreting some of the Kalantsis Alcorso and Eltis and Low data because of differences in the activities investigated. However, where comparisons are possible, mismatches are evident. Thus Kalantsis and Alcorso demonstrate that learners give a high rating to conversation practice and a low rating to the use of cassettes, audiovisuals, TV, video and language games. Eltis and Low confirm that teachers give a medium rating to the use of pictures, films and video, and a very high rating to pair work. The only area of conflict in the data occurs in the case of language games which received a high rating in the Eltis and Low study and a low rating in the Nunan study.

Brindley (1984b), in a series of interviews with teachers and learners, uncovered what seemed to be two mutually incompatible sets of beliefs about the nature of language and language learning by teachers and learners, and which would appear to account for the studies reported on in the preceding section. He suggests that:

> It is clear that many learners do have rather fixed ideas (in some cases culturally determined) about what it is to be a learner and what it is to learn

a language. These ideas, not always at a conscious level, run roughly thus:

- Learning consists of acquiring a body of knowledge.
- The teacher has this knowledge and the learner has not.
- The knowledge is available for revision and practice in a textbook or some other written form.
- It is the role of the teacher to impart this knowledge to the learner through such activities as explanation, writing and example. The learner will be given a program in advance.
- Learning a language consists of learning the structural rules of the language and the vocabulary through such activities as memorisation, reading and writing. (p.97)

The teachers' views, on the other hand, seemed to be as follows:

- Learning consists of acquiring organising principles through encountering experience.
- The teacher is a resource person who provides language input for the learner to work on.
- Language data is to be found everywhere - in the community and media as well as in textbooks.
- It is the role of the teacher to assist learners to become self-directing by providing access to

language data through such activities as active listening, role play and interaction with native speakers.

- For learners, learning a language consists of forming hypotheses about the language input to which they will be exposed, these hypotheses being constantly modified in the direction of the target model.

These beliefs are reflected in the comments made on the sorts of learning activities preferred by learners. Teachers made comments such as the following:

"All they want is grammar."
"I tried to get them to watch a video, but they didn't like it."
"They didn't want to go on excursions. They wanted to stay in the classroom and do grammar exercises."
"They kept asking for a textbook."

Statements from learners seemed to confirm these views:

"Without the grammar, you can't learn the language."
"I don't want to clap and sing. I want to learn English."
"I want something I can take home and study. We do a lot of speaking, but we never see it written down."

(Brindley 1984b:96)

It would seem that differences between learners and teachers are to be accounted for in terms of the sociocultural background and previous learning experiences of the learners, and the influence on teachers of recent directions in communicative language learning and teaching. Such differences are likely to influence the effectiveness of teaching strategies.

3. THE LEARNER-CENTRED CURRICULUM

Given a mismatch between the expectations of learners and the views of the teacher, the question arises of what is to be done. There would seem to be several alternatives. The teacher could ignore the wishes of the learners and force them to adopt a "sink or swim" approach to the class. The learning preferences of the students could be adopted, with the teacher abandoning his/her own preferences. The selection of learning strategies and activities could become the focus of discussion, consultation and negotiation.

The first course of action would seem to be fraught with dangers, particularly in learning environments where the courses are not compulsory and students can vote with their feet. The complete abandonment by the teacher of his/her own preferences would also seem to be rather extreme. The preferred option would seem to be the third, and it is this option which is explored in the rest of this paper.

Option three is based on a learner-centred view of the language curriculum, in which curriculum decisions about what, how and when to teach are derived from information about the learner. In such an approach, it is much less feasible to prespecify curriculum content and methodology. These will emerge during the first few weeks of the course as a result of extensive negotiation and consultation between teacher and learners.

The basic problem here, of course, is that learners generally do not cast themselves in a consultative role. As Brindley (1984b) discovered in his study of teachers and learners:

> The principle of consultation with learners is fundamental to a learner-centred system. However, many teachers expressed doubts regarding the feasibility of consultation, pointing out a number of potential obstacles: the conflicting ideas held by teachers and learners about their respective roles; the resultant problems of reconciling learner-perceived needs with teacher-perceived needs; the learners' inability to state their needs clearly. (p. 95)

It would seem to follow that for learners to take part in the curriculum process, the aims of a course should be, not only to teach the language, but to teach the learner what it means to be a learner.

This become particularly crucial when there is a mismatch between learner and teacher expectations of the sort described in the preceding

section. If a teacher subscribing to current communicative principles of language learning and teaching encounters learners who view language learning as the internalisation of a body of knowledge, it is up to the teacher to convince learners of the value of classroom activities such as role play, problem solving and so on through explanation, discussion and demonstration. If a teacher follows a sink-or-swim philosophy, and forces learners to take part in activities when they are not convinced of the value of such activities, then little learning is likely to result.

In fact, it is not the case that learners are automatically antipathetic to communicative learning strategies. The Willing (1985) study revealed some interesting data on learner attitudes to communicative language teaching. He states that:

> It appears very strongly in the data that the general "communicative" trend in language teaching has a highly valued aspect, and also a considerably less valued aspect, in the estimation of the majority of learners.
>
> "Conversations in class", "talking to friends", and learning by observing and interacting with Australians were all rated very highly. In interviews and discussions it was clear that, in particular, methods which encourage "real" conversational practice and discussion (with teacher intervention with suggestions

> and error correction) is the single most highly valued learning modality.
>
> One the other hand, it appeared that what might be called the "artificial" side of the communicative approach is relatively unpopular. Listening activities using cassettes; activities involving pictures, films and video, and (especially) "games" all received quite low ratings.
>
> (Willing 1985:66)

4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The studies reported in this paper all indicate mismatches between the perceptions of learners and teachers on effective classroom strategies. It would seem that learners generally tend to adhere to what might be called "traditional" views, while teachers have been influenced by current trends in applied linguistics, particularly in the direction of communicative language learning and teaching.

The development of communicative approaches to language teaching has increased the options available to the language teacher. However, the real potential of such approaches will only become tangible if the learners themselves are convinced of their value. Consideration also needs to be given to the question of the degree to which the socio-culture of the language classroom can ever allow it to be truly "communicative". This is a question which demands empirical investigation (Nunan, forthcoming).

The appropriateness of different types of communicative activity will depend, not only on the purposes for, but also the contexts of learning. There may be a greater need for communicative activities in foreign language classrooms than in second language classrooms. In the latter, it may be more appropriate for the learners to be provided with the means for exploiting the language learning opportunities which exist in the outside community.

However, regardless of the purposes and contexts of learning, it is only through sensitivity to the learners and their perceptions of the learning process, along with a willingness for consultation and negotiation that curriculum innovations are likely to take root. As Candlin (1983) suggests:

> If the syllabus is sensitive to this disparity (between what is and what should be), then it can allow for formative experiment and evaluation and consequent changes in both content and direction. if it is insensitive, then both teachers and learners become alienated and incapacitated servants of a set of requirements at odds with their individuality and the requirements of the classroom. (p.8)

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